



CAN EUROPE EXIST WITHOUT RUSSIA?

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The question that is the title of this article was the one asked of the participants of a seminar that I had the honor to organize thirty years ago. It was 1994. Russia was struggling to emerge from the ruins of the Soviet empire. Its long captivity had exhausted it. Finally free, she had only one aspiration—to regain her strength and become herself again. By this I mean not only to regain the material prosperity that the Bolsheviks had squandered, but also to rebuild its shattered social relations, its collapsed political order, its distorted culture and its lost identity

At that time, I was a member of the European Parliament. I felt it was essential to understand what the new Russia was, what path it was taking, and how Western Europe could work with it. I had the idea to lead a delegation of deputies to Moscow to discuss these issues with our counterparts in the Federal Duma. I spoke about it to Philippe Seguin, who was then president of the French National Assembly. He immediately agreed to my project. The Russian parliamentarians responded to our request by inviting us to come immediately. By mutual agreement, we decided to expand our respective delegations to include experts in the fields of economics, defense, culture and religion, so that their thoughts would inform our discussions.

Seguin and I were not only driven by the curiosity of this then-undecided nation. We saw ourselves as heirs to a French school of thought that Europe is one, from the Atlantic to the Urals, not only geographically, but also in terms of its culture and history. We also believed that neither peace, nor economic development, nor the progress of ideas could be established on our continent, if its nations were to tear each other apart, or even ignore each other. We wanted to continue the policy of understanding and cooperation begun by Charles de Gaulle from 1958 to 1968 and briefly taken up again in 1989 by François Mitterrand in his proposal for a "great European confederation."

NATO: An Obstacle to our Projects

We knew that there was an obstacle to our project—it was called NATO. De Gaulle, the first to do so, had constantly denounced this "system thanks to which Washington holds the defense and consequently the politics and even the territory of its European allies." He affirmed that there would never be "a Europe truly European," as long as its Western nations did not free themselves from the "heavy tutelage" that the New World exercised over the Old. He had set an example by "freeing France from integration under American command." The other governments did not dare to follow him. But the fall of the Soviet empire in 1990, and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, seemed to us to justify Gaullist

policy: it was obvious to us that NATO, having lost its *raison d'être*, had to disappear. There was no longer any obstacle to a close understanding between all the peoples of Europe. Seguin, as a visionary statesman, could foresee "a security organization specific to Europe," in the form of "a European Security Council in which four or five of its main powers, including Russia and France, would have the right of veto."

It was with these ideas that I flew to Moscow. Seguin was held back in Paris by an unforeseen constraint of the French parliamentary session. Our seminar lasted three days. The Russian elite came as eagerly as the representatives of Western Europe. From our exchanges, I retained one main lesson—our interlocutors were haunted by two fundamental questions for the future of their nation: who is Russian? How to ensure Russia's security?

The first question arose from the arbitrary borders that Stalin had imposed on the Russian people within the former Soviet Union. The second was the resurgence of tragic memories of past invasions. There were those who thought that the answers were to be found in exchanges with Western Europe, whose nations had learned to negotiate their limits and to collaborate fraternally for the good of all. And then there were others who, rejecting the idea of a European vocation for Russia, saw it as having a destiny of its own, which they called "Eurasian." Of course, it was the first group that we encouraged. It was to this group that we brought our proposals. At that time, it was dominant.

Rereading the minutes of that seminar thirty years later, my heart sinks as I rediscover the warning given to us by an eminent academician, a member of the Presidential Council at the time: "If the West does not show any willingness to understand Russia, if Moscow does not acquire what it aspires to—an effective European security system—if Europe does not overcome our isolation, then Russia will inevitably become a revisionist power. It will not be satisfied with the status quo and will actively seek to destabilize the continent."

In 2022, that is precisely what it is doing. Why has our generation of Europeans failed so miserably in the unifying work that in 1994 seemed within reach?

We tend to put the responsibility exclusively on one man: Putin, "a brutal and cold dictator, an inveterate liar, nostalgic for a vanished empire," whom we must fight, or even eliminate, so that democracy, a precious treasure of the West, may also prevail in the East and establish peace there. It is to this task, under the aegis of NATO, that the President of the United States, Joe Biden, calls us. His

explanation has the advantage of being simple; but it is too self-serving to be accepted without examination. Those who do not allow themselves to be dominated by the emotions of current events have no trouble understanding that the problem facing Europe is much more complex and profound.

The history of our continent over the past thirty years can be summarized as a progressive distancing of East from West. In the former Soviet empire, the main concern was, and still is, to rebuild nations that reconnect with their past and live in security in order to be themselves again. For Russia, this means bringing together all the peoples who claim the motherland, establishing stable and trusting relations with the brotherly peoples of Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, and building a European security system that protects it from external dangers.

The European Obsession

Western European leaders have had a very different preoccupation. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, they have given their attention, their energy, and their confidence to what they have called the "European Union." The Maastricht Treaty, the construction of the single currency, the Lisbon "constitution"—this is what they have been working on almost full time. While in the East they made painstaking efforts to make up for lost time in national history, in the West the elites were carried away by an irresistible mystique—that of the overcoming of nations and the rational organization of the common space. The problem of security no longer arose in the West, since all disputes between member states were to be settled by supranational bodies. Peace in the "Union" seemed to be definitively established. In short, the West thought it had overcome the idea of nationhood and built a stable system of the happy ending of history. Russia was facing burning questions about the idea of nationhood and had a growing sense of heartbreaking appointments with history. Under these conditions, the East and the West had little left to exchange, except oil and machine tools, which are on a level too low to mitigate their divergent future.

As a result, NATO has become an even worse bone of contention than it was in the days of the two blocs. In Western Europe, the Washington-led military organization is seen as a benign guarantee against the possible returns of history. It allows the member peoples of the European Union to enjoy the "peace dividend" from the outside world without worrying about it, just as the Union does with its internal peace. In Russia, NATO appears as a mortal threat. It is the instrument of a power that has shown on many occasions, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, its desire for world hegemony and domination over Europe. The inclusion of Poland, the three Baltic states and Romania, all so close to

Russia, in the territories covered by America's supremacy, was applauded in the West. In Moscow, it raised alarm and anger.

The Failure of France

And France? Why has it not tried to prevent the progressive division of our continent? Because its ruling class has consistently chosen to give absolute priority to the mystique of the "European Union." As a logical consequence, it has allowed itself to be drawn into its natural complement, NATO. Jacques Chirac participated, reluctantly of course, but explicitly, in the expedition decided by Washington against Serbia. Sarkozy took the step of re-adhering our country to the system that America dominates. Hollande and Macron have tied us more and more closely to the organization whose head is across the Atlantic. As they tied us more closely to NATO, our presidents lost much of the international credit that France had when it was free to do as it thought best.

A surge of conscience has sometimes led them to reject American tutelage and to resume the mission that de Gaulle had begun. Chirac refusing to participate in Bush's aggression against Iraq, Sarkozy settling alone with Moscow the conditions of an armistice in Georgia, Hollande negotiating the Minsk agreements to put an end to the fighting in Ukraine—all performed acts worthy of our vocation in Europe. They even managed to involve Germany. But alas, their efforts were improvised, partial and short-lived.

It is because of this series of divergences that Europe has once again been cut in two. The unfortunate Ukraine, situated on the fracture line of the continent, is the first to pay the price in blood, tears and destruction. Russia claims it in the name of history. The European Union is indignant in the name of democratic values which, according to it, have put an end to history. America takes advantage of this insoluble quarrel to silently advance its pawns and make the outcome of the war even more complicated.

Here is where Europe is, a third of a century after its reunification—an abyss of misunderstandings divides it; a cruel war tears it apart; a new iron curtain, imposed this time by the West, is beginning to separate its space; the arms race has resumed; and, even more than the vertiginous fall of economic exchanges, it is the end of cultural exchanges that threatens each of its two parts. The great European John Paul II said that our continent could only breathe with its two lungs. Now, in the West as in the East, we are condemned to breathe with only one. This is a bad omen for both halves. But true

Europeans must refuse to be discouraged. Even if they are little heard today, it is they and they alone who will be able to bring peace to our continent and restore its prosperity and greatness.

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